

VZCZCXRO3643
OO RUEHDBU
DE RUEHMO #1695/01 2920613
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 190613Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4142
INFO RUCNCS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHHD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 011695

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/RUS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/19/2016

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM SOCI RS

SUBJECT: ELECTORAL COMMISSION CHAIRMAN ON ELECTIONS

REF: A. MOSCOW 11413

1B. MOSCOW 11388

Classified By: DCM Daniel A. Russell: 1.4 (b,d).

Summary

11. (C) Central Electoral Commission (CEC) Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov reviewed the October 8 regional elections, recent developments in electoral technology, prospects for the 2007 regional and national (Duma) elections, and possible further amendments to the election law in a meeting with Embassy October 13. Highlights:

-- the CEC plans to introduce a voter hotline and offer informational seminars both for would-be election observers and parties registered after January 1, 2007;

-- the Novgorod experiment with electronic voting was a success and will be continued;

-- there are plans to introduce SMS reporting of vote tallies for interested election observers;

-- voter participation had plunged about 20 percent in Karelia October 8 because of the de-listing of Yabloko and the elimination of the "against all" option for the thoroughly disenchanted voter;

-- legislation is under consideration in the Duma which could allow for the calling of "snap" elections and could make registration requirements for political parties more stringent;

-- Veshnyakov will lead a small delegation to the U.S. at the time of the November elections. End summary.

Electronic Voting a Qualified Success

12. (C) Central Electoral Commission (CEC) Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov opened his meeting with Embassy October 13 by describing his impressions of Russia's latest experiment with electronic voting, in Novgorod on October 8. Veshnyakov described the voting process as easy to use by voters of all ages, but he thought a public awareness campaign would be needed, should the CEC decide to use electronic voting more widely in Russia. The process met the standards of the Council of Europe, and observers from Hungary, Ukraine, Australia, Austria, and Great Britain had been favorably impressed with the experiment.

SMS Vote Tracking Experiment

13. (C) Another initiative being pioneered by the CEC, said Veshnyakov, is SMS vote-tally reporting. Noting that there are 130 million mobile phones in Russia, Veshnyakov said the CEC had "patented" a process for providing real-time polling station results to "anyone" with a phone who has subscribed to the service. Veshnyakov touted the initiative as designed to overcome the Russian voter's distrust of the electoral process. As designed, it would allow voters to compare tallies provided at local polling places with those reported to regional electoral commissions. Veshnyakov said the experiment had been tried on a limited scale in Novgorod. It would be more widely introduced in the March 2007 regional and national (Duma) elections.

A Look at the October 8 Regional Elections

14. (C) Veshnyakov pronounced himself satisfied with the conduct of the October 8 regional elections (reftels). He thought the election results showed that the more ideologically democratic parties (Yabloko, SPS, the Republican Party) were in trouble. Yabloko had done poorly --two percent-- in Primorskiy Kray, one of the few contests it had entered, while the SPS had declined to participate. Veshnyakov noted parenthetically that a key proving ground for SPS will be the December 3 election in Perm, where SPS Chairman Nikita Belykh will head his party's list. The Republican Party's performance was also underwhelming, it polled about one percent in Astrakhan. The lesson,

MOSCOW 00011695 002 OF 002

Veshnyakov thought, was that the parties must unite, but "they won't, and that is the problem."

15. (C) Veshnyakov was more optimistic about prospects for the "new left." Its three parties --the Russian Party of Life, the Party of Pensioners, and Rodina-- separately did well in several of the nine races, and he thought their collective performance would be better once they merged on October 28.

16. (C) Voter turnout on October 8 was "about what it had been" in the previous, March elections. Veshnyakov noted participation had increased in six regions and declined in the remaining three. The only cause for concern, he admitted, was Karelia, where turnout plummeted about twenty percent. Veshnyakov ascribed the slump to:

-- the de-listing of Yabloko, "which might have won 10 - 15 percent of the vote there," and a subsequent boycott by its voters;
-- disturbances in Kondopoga, which may have kept some timid voters from the polls,
-- the absence, this time around, of an "against all" ballot option for the thoroughly disenchanted voter.

Looking Ahead to 2007

17. (C) With the new election law amendments scheduled for full implementation as of January 1, 2007, Veshnyakov forecast a reduction of the number of registered parties from the current 34 to "more than ten." The CEC was planning a series of informational meetings with the remaining registered parties early in 2007, which he invited Embassy representatives to attend. On the agenda as well would be efforts, both electronically and through seminars, to inform election observers of the procedures and of their rights. Also planned was the introduction of a hotline, where voters will be able to air their complaints about the electoral system or their observations about the conduct of a given

election. Public Chamber member Andrey Przhezdomskiy who accompanied Veshnyakov at the meeting, described plans to unite the efforts of discrete organizations and to complement the CEC's attempts to create an educated pool of election observers throughout the country.

¶8. (C) Veshnyakov thought it possible there could be further modifications to the electoral law before the 2007 regional and national elections. (The current Duma session is the last in which changes can be introduced which would affect the 2007 contests.) He was worried by some proposals currently under discussion in the legislature. Among them:

- an amendment that would allow for the calling of "snap" elections;
- proposals that would make it more difficult to register political parties;
- further language on extremism that could be used to bar candidates or their parties from participation in elections.

The CEC was lobbying against any further changes to existing electoral legislation. He expected the picture to clarify in early November.

¶9. (C) Veshnyakov told Embassy he would lead a delegation of 5 - 7 persons to Washington, D.C., and "one or two other destinations" in conjunction with the November U.S. elections. Embassy offered to assist Veshnyakov and his delegation.

BURNS